

Analysis of Historical Writings in Jane Austen's Novels

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novels not only show her feminism to the reader but also appeal women to be independent. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma* are frequently used for analysing her feminism. Historical writings are regarded as a science because they not only explain the historical evidence collected by historians but also narrate historical facts. However, although Jane Austen portrayed the 'perfect' female characters in her books, the real life of eighteenth-century women was opposite to what she portrayed. This paper aims to compare Jane Austen's novels and historical writings through excerpts from Jane Austen's three novels. In addition, the purpose of it is to make the reader better understand the lifestyles of eighteenth-century women. Roy Porter's *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* will also be used for presenting the lifestyles of eighteenth-century women and drawing a conclusion that the eighteenth-century women worked hard than those described in the novels.

Keywords: *feminism, Jane Austen's novels, historical writings, eighteenth-century, the Industrial Revolution.*

1. INTRODUCTION

England in the eighteenth century was a period that was full of complex changes, including famine, disease, and changes of social structure. During this time, the people, especially women, had experienced hardships. The history of this period is worth exploring because historians can then better understand the eighteenth century. History, as the name suggests, is a way of understanding events that are in the past. The American Historical Association once defined history as a collection of facts about the past' [1]. History is indeed a way of collecting materials of past events. Thus, it can be argued that historical writings are a kind of writing based on actual incidents. Byrnes said that historical writings should 'always be analytic, moving beyond description' [5]. There is no doubt that historical writings are explanations for past events. In the eighteenth century, some female writers, such as Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, began to write books that focused on women. Women were 'enlightened' by their works or novels. Jane Austen, one of the feminists in the eighteenth century, can be seen as an exemplary writer of the period. Her books show love stories to the reader and call for the women to be independent. This essay explores Jane Austen's novels because they aid the reader to rethink the differences between historical writings and the nature of literature. In addition, the

book *English Society in the 18th century*, written by Roy Porter, will be used to compare historical writings and literary works. This paper will also discuss Jane Austen's novels from the perspective of feminism.

2. THE PLACE OF WOMEN REPRESENTED BY JANE AUSTEN

2.1. *Pride and Prejudice:*

Jane Austen's novels offer many descriptions of women's situations, marriage, and love, including, for example, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. The three books show that women deserve to be loved and deserve to have a happy ending. In the three novels, the writing aims to make the women realize that they can be independent instead of an accessory to a man. In the section that follows, it is shown that marriages are the core of Jane Austen's novels.

'Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object, it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness must be their pleasant preservative from want.' [3]

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen showed that for women, marriage was important because it conveyed money, title, and social status. In the article, I learned *Everything I Needed to Know About Marriage From Pride and Prejudice*, Prior [13] argued the best marriage knew how to 'balance prudence and passion' [13]. In Prior's argument, he believed that marriages were the core of Jane Austen's novels because they described romantic stories and included females' social status. [13]

However, most eighteenth-century marriages lacked prudence and passion. For example, Lydia's wedding, while seemingly a passionate marriage, was not prudent because she was not thinking highly either of men or matrimony. [13] Thus, Lydia is shown to be an uneducated woman.

Compared to Lydia's marriage, Charlotte's marriage was an example of a prudent marriages. Firstly, Charlotte Lucas married Mr. Collins because she had no other choice. Women in the eighteenth century had few chances to choose the lives they wanted. Charlotte chose Mr. Collins because she was 'at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome.' [13] and thus lacked options for marriage. Therefore, it is evident that choosing a 'good' husband is essential for poor and uneducated women.

Moreover, as far as the historical situation of middle-class women is concerned, middle-class women had to choose a good husband as they lacked money and had few options to earn money by themselves. For example, Swords [15] argued that women in the eighteenth century had little 'economic freedom.' The reason why they do not have the freedom is that money will automatically become their husbands'.

Another significant aspect of middle-class women is their social status. It is likely that a middle-class woman would not have been able to access education. For instance, Swords [15] believed that a 'proper education' depended on a woman's family. In his article "*Woman's place" in Jane Austen's England*, he argued that a learned father or brother could educate his daughters or sisters. Otherwise, having a library in the home could also enable the women of the household to learn knowledge. Without money and education, middle-class women, such as Charlotte, regarded marriage as their only chance to change their lives.

Thus, it seems likely that most middle-class women of the eighteenth century had unhappy marriages because many of them did not have enough money or education to have chosen good partners for themselves.

2.2. Sense and Sensibility:

The previous part discussed women's marriages and the place of middle-class women in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Although the main factors affecting marriage are women's social status and economic limitations, there are still other factors that affect the place of women. The following section focuses on *Sense and Sensibility*.

"For months? -Have you known of this for four months?"

Elinor confirmed it.

.....

Four months! Cried Marianne again. So calm! So cheerful! – ho have you been supported?"

.....

'I understand you. -- You do not suppose that I have ever felt much. For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature; knowing that it would make you and my mother most unhappy whenever it was explained to you, yet unable to prepare you for it in the least.....If you can think me capable of ever feeling-surely you may suppose that I have suffered now' [4]

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen focuses on women's rights. For example, in the conversation between Elinor and Marianne, it is evident that eighteenth-century women had to control their affections and emotions. The words "four months" and "without being liberty" show that women's behaviours were limited by society because they could not express their feelings in public. Since women had fewer rights in the eighteenth century, Elinor, the ideal female character in Jane Austen's novel, shows that women were repressed at the time because their behaviours and emotions were strictly monitored.

Besides, Melz [9] also argued that Elinor was 'the ideal image Gregory' because she knows how to 'perform' well in society. It might be true that women's situations are influenced by culture. In addition, Melz [9] also believed that the reason for it 'was what a woman [was] expected to be.' (p41) In other words, the place of women depends on their social environment.

However, it has commonly been assumed that patriarchy is one of the reasons affecting women's rights. For instance, in *Women on the Road: Women in Patriarchal Society in Sense and Sensibility*, Zhou [16] argued that 'sense' and 'sensibility' were stereotypes about women. At that time, the distinction between 'masculine and 'feminine' was obvious. Smith [16] states:

"The masculine stereotype includes aggressive, competitiveness, rationality, analytic ability, objectivity... The feminine stereotype includes passivity, irrationality, emotionality, empathy..." [16]

Zhou [16] argued that these stereotypes were the reasons for restricting women's behaviours. For example, if a woman is regarded as a passive person,

she will be despised if she behaves like an active person. These restrictions and stereotypes made women's lives harder.

Likewise, due to this reason, women of certain classes were not able to work outside and earn money by themselves. The reason for this is because their 'primary role was child-bearing and care of the family while man's duty was to 'provide for the family's well-being. [16] Therefore, these stereotypes make the gender role intensified.

2.3.Emma

The significant factors affecting women in the eighteenth century were the patriarchal system and the stereotypes. However, compared with the beginning of the eighteenth century, the social status of women had improved by the end of the eighteenth century. In the next section, *Emma* will be used to show how women's social situation had improved.

'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.' [2]

Jane Austen believed that women in the eighteenth century had changed from the beginning of the eighteenth century. For instance, Hilbrandt [7] argued that *Emma* was a strongly feminist novel compared to other books. This is because 'she is a single woman living with her father on his estate called Hartfield' [7]. *Emma* is an independent woman because she has to take care of herself.

There are three reasons why women's social status improved. One reason is that female schools had been set up. For instance, in the article *Women's Education, 'Self-Improvement' and Social Mobility-A Late Eighteenth-Century Debate*, Miller [10] argued that women's education was improved due to the booming of women's schools, such as charity schools, schools of industry, Sunday schools and new boarding schools. These new boarding schools and day schools were for "young ladies" and "young gentlemen."

It can be argued that educating women was vital at the end of the eighteenth century. For example, British historian William St. Clair once argued that nearly 200,000 books were sold to British families because some writers thought 'women should be accomplished' by reading a wide range of books [14] According to Rojas [14], a possible explanation is that literature books were booming.

'Ladies now in general read, not only novels, although many of that class are excellent products and tend to polish both the heart and the head, they also read the best books in the English language, and may read

the best authors in various languages.....acquainted with works of taste and genius as any gentleman in the kingdom' [12]

Another reason for improving women's rights is that the concept of women's education changed. In Porter's [12] *English society in the 18th century*, he argued that people had a desire to read poetry, history books, and novels because they tended to 'polish both the heart and the head.' Thus, this might be the main reason why women start reading books. Besides, finding job opportunities could be another reason. For instance, Miller [10] said that many women were considered governesses by the end of the eighteenth century. According to Miller [10], this was probably due to the change of social structure. With the increasing numbers of middle-class women and workshops, many of them went to work outside. Therefore, for most women, becoming a governess was a good choice.

Finally, some feminists, such as Marry Wollstonecraft, appealed that women should be independent and have more rights. For example, in her book *The Rights of Women*, she believed that the development of women's education was essential because 'they should be free to carve out careers' [12] Besides, Miller [10] also argued about women's education in his *Women's Education, 'Self-Improvement' and Social Mobility-A Late Eighteenth-Century Debate*; he believed that women's education brought about the realisation that women's development was influential in society. Thus, the aim of improving women's education is to make women rethink their rights and roles.

3. THE LIFESTYLES OF WOMEN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Although the women depicted by Jane Austen are independent, beautiful, and thoughtful, real-life women were often the opposite of what she portrayed. Of course, the female characters in Jane Austen's novels are invented and therefore actual women's lifestyles in the eighteenth century differ from the lives shown in the books. However, some people believe that historical scholarship offer evidence because they explain past events to the reader. The section that follows will analyse the lifestyles of middle-class women in the eighteenth century to find out how they differed from those in the novels.

In *English society in the 18th century*, Porter [12] once described the women's lives in the eighteenth century:

'Millions of women earned their keep by toiling in light industry, in workshops, in taverns, in eating places, in the field, and domestic service. Except among the upper bourgeoisie and gentry, they were expected to be money earners as well as bearing children and running the home... Till now, historians of women have

focused attention more on "bluestockings" than the seamstresses' [12]

In real life, many women went to work in workshops, taverns, and eating places. Because Britain was the first industrial country, people, including women, had to earn money by themselves because the Industrial Revolution made them jobless. Gurevich [6] also argued that culture played a significant role in forming a society because of how "a set of cultural "coordinates" ingrained in the human mind.' There is no doubt that the culture of eighteenth-century English society influenced people. For example, the outbreak of the Enlightenment (1685–1815) has changed people's ingrained ideas that women should stay at home and not work outside the home. Therefore, women and children were in great demand in factories once the new culture has appeared.

'women and children were in great demand for factory work, and wage-levels were attractive (though, of course, entrepreneurs picked female and child labor because it was cheaper than male)." [12]

After the Industrial Revolution outbreak, some workshops or factories want to hire women or children because their salaries are cheaper than men's. This might be the main reason that urges women to work outside the home.

While Nicholas and Oxley [11] believe that the Industrial Revolution is the main reason for making women go out for jobs, Hobsbawm and Ranger [8] believed that modernity was another reason that pushed women to be independent. In *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger [8] argued that the Industrial Revolution was related to the 'invention of traditions'. The term 'invention of tradition' is used by Hobsbawm and Ranger (2013) to refer to a 'process of formalization and ritualization'. According to the definition made by Hobsbawm and Ranger [8], the process can be regarded as a modernization, which means that new traditions have replaced 'old' traditions (2). It is true that the Industrial Revolution is a good illustration of modernity because new systems were set up, and the majority of society accepted new ideas.

These women's lifestyles show that women are more likely to struggle with their lives than in the novels. In the books, all the female characters have a happy ending and live happily with their husbands. However, in real-life, most women worked hard and lived unhappily with their husbands because of the economy and the change of social structure. Therefore, it is evident that historical writings can be regarded as a science because they explain facts through social, economic, and cultures.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by comparing novels and historical writings, it is clear that the nature of literature is based on imagination. In contrast, historical writings are based on facts collected by historians. The place of women in Jane Austen's novels is always independent, well-educated, and brave, which was the opposite of reality. In other words, literature is fictional. For example, in Jane Austen's novels, most books focus on the invented love stories. These stories might have been based to some extent on society and real life at that time.

However, historical writings can be regarded as better sources because they not only explain the historical evidence collected by historians but also narrate historical facts. However, some historians, for example, Professor Berend, might argue that there is no clear cut between literature and historical writings because they are related. Knowing Jane Austen's novels and the situations of English society can help us understand eighteenth-century society better.

However, there are still some limitations in using these materials. For instance, there are few records about women's lives in the eighteenth century. The lack of accurate historical records might make it more difficult for historians to judge historical events and social backgrounds at that time. And whether historical writings are accurate is difficult to judge, as many people hold different views about historical writings and literature because they see things from a different perspective. As mentioned earlier, literature focuses on invented stories while historians concentrate on facts. Hopefully, historical writings and historians will continue serving our society in the future.

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